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Heller, Mark A.

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The United States and Israel: The Risk of Growing Apart

If Illiberal Democracy Prevails in Israel, the Special Relationship May Not Survive

Mark A. Heller

United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's assertion that "the establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law" is merely the latest example of how US and Israeli policies have marched almost in lockstep since Donald Trump's inauguration as president. However, the United States and Israel have shared an intense and intimate relationship that long predates the Trump Administration and goes beyond the chemistry of individual leaders. In many respects, in fact, that relationship is unique in American foreign relations and uniquely critical to Israeli security. It is grounded in a shared narrative of biblically inspired frontier societies that have gathered in immigrants and refugees, tamed the wilderness, and built liberal democracy. This explains the broadly receptive environment in the United States for the message of US-Israeli commonality. Nevertheless, the durability of the relationship is not guaranteed. If the societies and political cultures of the two countries either continue to develop along parallel, illiberal lines or shift simultaneously in a more liberal direction, the connection between them will be preserved, or even strengthened. However, if they diverge, and especially if Israel maintains its rightward drift while America moves in an opposite direction, the normative foundation of the relationship will erode, with ominous implications for Israel.

Following the inconclusive Israeli election of September 17, 2019, President Donald Trump did not call Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, either to congratulate or to commiserate. In view of the ostensibly tight connection between the two, Trump was pressed for an explanation. In response, he tweeted that the United States is tied to Israel the country, not to any particular leader or party. That tie is indisputable and is manifest in the fact that the United States provides the kind of alternative strategic depth that Israel has always sought in order to compensate for its relative lack of territorial and other resources needed to blunt threats to its security.

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The Nature of the US-Israeli Relationship

Contrary to popular impression, however, the United States was not always Israel's major great power partner. In 1948, as the United States applied an arms embargo to both sides in the Arab-Israeli War (and Great Britain continued to train and supply several Arab client armies), it was actually the Soviet Union that provided the critical, albeit fleeting, support needed to stave off Arab attempts to abort the birth of the Jewish state. In the 1950s and early 1960s, as the Soviet Union turned hostile and the United States was at best standoffish, it was France that took on the role of Israel's great power patron. It was only after 1967, and especially after 1973, that American political leadership and American public opinion acknowledged a convergence of interests and values, which permitted US-Israel ties to deepen and broaden. Since then — and notwithstanding periodic tensions, primarily about differing approaches to Arab-Israeli conflicts — the relationship has grown more intense and intimate, to the point where the two countries share a special relationship of the sort that neither Israel nor, arguably, the United States has with any other foreign partner.

The benefits of these ties for Israel have been undeniable. The United States has provided Israel with lavish military assistance (currently amounting to $3.8 billion per annum, equivalent to about 1% of Israel's GDP), granted access to advanced technologies and weapons systems (64% of all Israeli weapons purchases in the period 2014—2018 were made in the United States), and offered participation in joint development projects that have helped Israel to sustain a qualitative military edge over its adversaries. The United States has also been a source of real-time resupply of military consumables in times of high-intensity conflict and of considerable intelligence assets. In economic terms, the volume of Israel's trade with the United States is larger than that with any other single country (though not with the European Union as a whole), and the United States is a major source of investment capital. And diplomatically, the United States has provided a political shield against efforts of Israel's adversaries to isolate, sanction, and otherwise punish it in international fora. Furthermore, the relationship with the United States has not only prevented or deterred damaging actions by others hostile to Israel; Israel's ties with and putative influence in the United States have even induced some third parties to cultivate a closer relationship with Israel in the hope that that link would somehow help improve their own standing in Washington. Finally, the United States has been the primary broker of efforts to contain or resolve conflicts with Egypt and Jordan and has served as the most reliable intermediary from Israel's perspective in efforts to contain/resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — an agenda item for most American presidents over the last four decades.

For the United States, the political-strategic benefits that have accrued from this relationship are more limited but still noteworthy. During the Cold War, Israeli power helped blunt advances by Soviet clients and fortify US-aligned regimes, and Israeli battlefield successes allowed the American security establishment to enhance its understanding of Soviet military technologies and doctrines. Since the end of the Cold War, continuing intelligence exchanges and joint development and evaluation of new technologies have helped improve the American ability to analyze the Middle East and respond to military challenges, and not only in the field of counter-terrorism.

It is clear, however, that the strategic benefits of this relationship, while reciprocal, are not symmetrical, and the American embrace of Israel is explained at least as much by common values as by convergent interests. The commonalities go beyond membership by both in the club of liberal democracies; America shares that membership with dozens of other countries in the world. Nor do domestic politics explain the singularity of the US-Israeli relationship. True, the United States is home to the

largest, most prosperous, and most self-assured Jewish community in the diaspora, one which has historically identified strongly with Israel and acted to promote American-Israeli relations. But the United States is also home to many other large diasporas, and these have also played an important role in American "ethnic" politics; some, such as Cuban-Americans, for example, have influenced US policy vis-à-vis the country of their concern, but others, such as the "China Lobby," have registered very partial successes, at best.

In any case, what seems to be unique about Israel — and what explains the degree to which the message of its advocates resonates with the broader American public — is the extent to which its story is seen to overlap America's own. Both countries see themselves as the executors of some exceptional historical mission rooted in biblical sources to redeem land and people while freeing themselves from the undemocratic background of their historical origins. The millenarian idea of building "the New Jerusalem" was a common religious theme in America from the 17th to 19th centuries, analogous to the millenarian theme even among secular Zionists of redeeming the Jewish people; the original 13 American colonies are dotted with towns bearing names taken from the Old Testament. It is the perception of narrative convergence that has provided a broadly receptive environment for the message of American-Israeli commonality. Absent that environment, it is doubtful whether any amount of activism by Jewish pro-Israel elements could have produced the kind of outcomes characterizing American policy over the past half-century. However, if that environment changes because of changes in the society and political culture of one or both countries, the narrative overlap could be put to a serious test.

A Changing Israel

At least part of the convergence — the part relating to the culture of liberal democracy — has begun to fray. Over the past few decades, Israel has witnessed a strengthening of traditionalist and conservative forces inclined to interpret democracy as little more than the will of the majority and intent on whittling away at the cultural and institutional "obstacles" to the majority's unfettered rule. Such obstacles include separation of powers (especially an independent judiciary), the rule of law, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property, as well as independent, that is, critical, mass media — all underpinned by tolerance, if not respect for, minority cultures, interests, and opinions, and for the individual rights and liberties of citizens. These features are the hardware and software of liberal democracy, and if they are undermined — even as the consequence of the outcome of free elections — the result will be illiberal democracy, or "majoritarian authoritarianism."

The strengthening of illiberal parties has come at the expense of left-wing and secularist forces, and the principal loser in this trend has been the Israeli Labor Party in its various guises. Labor, when still in the form of Mapai (the Israel Workers' Party), created Israel's pre-state institutions, established the state, and dominated its governments for the first three decades of the country's existence. Since 1977, however, the Labor Party has led or co-led ruling coalitions for only 12 years; for the rest of the time, center-right or right-wing coalitions have dominated, and the Labor Party and its socialist and social-democratic partners have been reduced to shells of their former selves.

This trend certainly reflects a shift toward more hardline public attitudes on relations with Arab/Muslim adversaries, especially the Palestinians — the cumulative result of inconclusive war processes and counter-terror campaigns, but also of disappointing peace processes. Perhaps the single most important inflection point came in 2000, when what was widely viewed, even by President Bill Clinton, as a very forthcoming Israeli proposal that went beyond the parameters suggested by Clinton himself, was met, in the view of most

Israelis, not by Palestinian acceptance or even by continuing negotiations, but rather by a protracted campaign of terror that included dozens of bombings of civilians, causing hundreds of deaths. The experience of the "Second Intifada" persuaded many Israeli voters that the "peace process" was an illusion, enough of one, in fact, to produce a shift in the center of political gravity that has persisted for almost two decades.

However, the focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tells only part of the story, because attitudinal studies over time still show greater support for conciliatory policies than for the political parties that espouse those conciliatory policies. Even in 2018, years after the "death" of the peace process had become conventional wisdom, 58% of Israeli Jews (and 89% of Israeli Arabs) still supported a two-state resolution of the conflict, and 62% of Israeli Jews felt that Israel's best option was to strive either for a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians or for transitional agreements resulting in separation from the Palestinians. In other words, "the Palestinian issue" is not the sole — and perhaps not even the central — wedge issue of the left-right divide in Israeli worldviews, in general, and in voting behavior, in particular.

Instead, the successes of the right-wing bloc are due to a combination of factors. The Palestinian issue/peace process is certainly one of them; it may even be the case that the perception that the positions adopted by left-wing governments and parties abroad (especially in Europe) are driven by an anti-Israel animus exposes the Israeli left to the criticism that it is a co-conspirator with its ideological soulmates overseas. The extent to which the left can be tarred by the European brush is reflected in the finding that 51% of Israeli Jews (but only 14% of Israeli Arabs) view the European Union as a foe, whereas only 24% view it as a friend (as opposed to 48% of Israeli Arabs).

However, in addition to the strengthening of the nationalist right — whether for ideological reasons or security calculations — there are social changes trending in the same direction. One is the persistence of identity politics, coupled with growing socio-economic inequality. This is not just a question of the "ethnic divide" among Israeli Jews. This division, per se, has not intensified: "inter-marriage" between Ashkenazi (European) and Sephardi (Eastern) Jews, for example, has actually become much more common and socially acceptable, and it now accounts for more than 20% of all Jewish marriages, as opposed to only about 5% in the 1970s. However, socio-economic inequality has grown appreciably in recent decades; from the mid-1980s to the late 2000s, Israel's Gini coefficient — measuring the inequality of distribution of income after taxes and transfers — rose from 0.326 to 0.371; among the 36 member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), only the United States, Chile, Turkey, and Mexico had more unequal income distribution. Moreover, growing socio-economic gaps find expression in growing educational gaps; PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests in 2018 (which did not even include ultra-Orthodox students, whose independent but state-financed school system does not teach minimum core curriculum requirements in mathematics, science, and English) showed that advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students in reading by 121 score points (compared with an OECD-wide average difference of 89 score points), and that this performance gap had actually grown by 18 score points since 2009 (whereas the average OECD performance gap rise in the same period had been only two points).

These inequalities overlap much of the residual ethnic divide that still separates Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews (not to speak of Arabs and Jews as a whole). Among the latter, the consequence of all this is often a gulf between center and periphery and between "the elites" and "the people." This sort of gulf sustains feelings of prejudice and victimization and provides fodder for political exploitation, including the kind of incitement against "the establishment," the left, socialists, foreigners, and minorities

frequently seen in other illiberal democracies. A dramatic example of this mindset is the complaint of a Likud campaign advisor and former speechwriter for Prime Minister Netanyahu, more than 40 years after the Likud first came to power: "The left set up the state and left it in ruins; it left most of Israel's citizens oppressed. Two countries were built here — the country of the owners, of the hegemony, the elites, and a second country of the second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-class citizens — and that's us, the majority of the people..."

A second trend is the "traditionalization" of society due to higher birth rates in the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities, hence the growing electoral weight of religious voters and the preservation — if not enhancement — of the influence of the Orthodox/ultra-Orthodox religious establishment. The average fertility rate of ultra-Orthodox women is currently 7.1 children per woman, as opposed to 4 for modern religious women, 2.7 for "traditional" women, and 2.1 for secular Jewish women. If these patterns continue, the ultra-Orthodox, who are now about 12% of the population, will account for 32% of the population by 2065.

The hardening of attitudes toward the Palestinians alone could not have produced the seemingly durable shift toward right-wing illiberalism in Israel. Nor could socio-economic and socio-ethnic polarization alone have brought about that result. Even religious traditionalization alone could not have been a sufficient condition. However, though the peculiarities of the proportional representation system of elections have made it impossible for security hawks, ideological hawks, national-religious or ultra-Orthodox streams, or the socio-ethnic "dispossessed" from attaining an electoral majority on their own, they have encouraged the convergence of all these streams and produced coalitions marked by symbolic and rhetorical posturing and material pandering to the components of the coalitions, which the left and center-left, traditional as well as secular, have been unwilling/unable to accommodate.

The result has been policy "packages" (grand bargains) combining many of the following elements: "hardline" positions on the Palestinian issue; efforts to constrain "judicial activism" (i.e., independent judicial review of the legality/constitutionality of actions taken by the executive branch and laws enacted by the legislative majority) by means of attacks on the Supreme Court for thwarting "the will of the people"; attempts to domesticate critical media by either corrupting them or delegitimizing them (for allegedly helping Israeli's enemies in their campaign to delegitimize the state); attacks on the public prosecutor and other unelected officials, including even the police (for investigating corruption by elected officials); attempts to discredit the loyalty of the "leftist" opposition; budgetary favoritism for religious institutions; acquiescence in demands of religious zealots to refuse allocation of a mixed-gender prayer space at the Western Wall; receptivity to conspiracy theories about "the deep state"; accommodation of xenophobic sentiments (e.g., attempts to deport grown Israeli-born children of foreign workers); and passage of a Nationality Law that changes virtually nothing in the material reality of the country but articulates preferential symbolic status to Jews.

It must be added that many of these attempts have been thwarted by legal and/or political opposition, and none of the trend lines identified here, even the demographic one, is unstoppable. In fact, there are some signs of growing pushback, including massive demonstrations against a proposed Immunity Law that would have shielded a serving prime minister from prosecution for criminal acts, and rejection of a proposed Override Clause that would have allowed the Knesset to nullify Supreme Court rulings — not to speak of two recent elections that denied victory to the partners of the illiberal coalition. Israel remains a vibrant democracy, but unless the trends identified here are reversed, Israel will remain at risk of its ethnic democracy being turned into ethnic chauvinism, of being pulled further away from

the liberal socio-political principles in which it is historically grounded, and of being transformed into a populist polity that is intolerant of minorities or political opposition of any kind.

A Changing America?

At first glance, there is little here that would seem to distinguish Israel from similar developments in the United States. After all, America also seems to be moving in the direction of illiberal democracy and populist nationalism in recent years. Donald Trump appears to have tapped a deep vein of American nativism and isolationism that goes back at least as far as the Know Nothing movement of the 1850s, and as president, he seems to be leading America away from its liberal tradition, in terms of both domestic politics and international order. America, too, has been experiencing growing socio-economic inequalities of the sort that appear to encourage illiberal populism. There is therefore no prima facie reason to conclude that American-Israeli commonality is diminishing, and that intimacy between the two countries is therefore likely to decline. On the contrary, parallel trends in the two countries might actually tighten the ties. This is exactly what has happened since 2017. Notwithstanding some remaining differences, such as attitudes toward Turkey, American endorsement of Israeli policy and American actions that are consistent with Israeli government objectives on the Palestinian question and other regional issues, especially Iranian nuclear ambitions and cultivation of ties between Israel and the Arab Gulf states, have reached unprecedented levels. That kind of complementarity could well continue if both countries either maintain their present political vector or else change direction more or less simultaneously.

However, there is a distinct possibility that trend lines in the coming years will not move in parallel fashion but will actually begin to diverge, and that gaps between the two countries will begin to widen in many spheres. Theoretically, Israel and the United States could begin to march to different drummers if Israel pivots in a more liberal direction and the United States maintains its populist course, at least in the near term. After all, most polls show Trump retaining the bulk of his supporters from the 2016 election, and the main economic indicators, especially unemployment, which political pundits insist are the most important predictors of election outcomes, appear to be working in his favor. Nevertheless, of the two possible causes of divergence, the more likely one is that Israel will continue to evolve over the foreseeable future as it has (with a few deviations) in the recent past, but that the United States will change course.

There are several reasons why this is so. First of all, the shift that has taken place in the United States is neither as pronounced nor as prolonged as the one in Israel. Indeed, the "illiberal" American shift that took place in 2016 is something of a quirk of the electoral system and also something of an optical illusion, because most of its manifestations are championed by a candidate who lost the popular vote and are not necessarily supported by public opinion. In fact, the rhetoric of illiberalism has so far outpaced actions of domestic or international illiberalism; NAFTA was abolished but replaced by NAFTA-II; NATO was declared "obsolete" but then the declaration was declared "obsolete"; the Border Wall was announced but not actually built; entry of Muslims into the country was banned and then the ban was reversed; the withdrawal of American troops in Syria was loudly proclaimed and quietly reversed.

Secondly, there is an established pattern of fluctuation between "left" and "right" in American politics, and every time someone explains why a fundamental and durable change has taken place, the thesis is almost immediately discredited by an electoral reversal. In fact, this is frequently evidenced almost immediately in mid-term congressional elections — including those of 2018 — where the normal pattern has been for the incumbent president's party to lose some strength, as if the electorate is trying

to remind him or her not to get carried away. Israel has no such tradition.

Thirdly, the federal system and the constitutional separation of powers and parallel electoral systems (for chief executive and legislature, as well as for state governments) in the United States provide a somewhat greater check on executive power because, in the case of clearly hostile public opinion, legislators can more easily separate their own political destinies from that of the head of government. The constitutional separation of state and religion in America, hence, the absence of any established religious authority, also means that, however pious Americans may be in their personal beliefs, their political system is not subject to the "traditionalizing" influence of a religious establishment with formal powers.

Finally, to the extent that demographic factors do play a role in determining the political texture of society, the sector most identified with the "illiberal democracy" allegedly ushered in after 2017 — white, non-Hispanic voters (lacking higher education) — is already diminishing in proportional terms and will begin to decline in absolute numbers in 2030. In many critical states, non-Hispanic whites are already in the minority, and many projections suggest that before 2045, Trump's main linguistic-racial constituency will be a minority in the entire country.

All these factors are highly relevant for the quality of American relations with Israel. A "liberal" swing of the pendulum in the United States, unless accompanied by a similar swing in Israel, may well produce an American government of a different texture, one less favorably disposed to Israel, even if there is no lingering resentment of the way in which both Trump and Netanyahu have become identified with the transformation of US-Israeli relations into a partisan issue. The Republicans have certainly tried to do this, but the extent to which they succeed depends at least in part on the Democratic response. Centrist Democratic presidential candidates — those running to the middle — are trying to resist, but their efforts are not universally endorsed. Many of the constituencies of "liberalism," at least as embodied in the Democratic Party of the 21st century, have less of an affinity with Israel's historical narrative, and some — to judge by the explicit preferences of a few in the radical wing of the Democratic Party, and even by the content of debates in the 2019 Democratic presidential primary campaigns — are prepared to advocate changes in the quality of the bilateral relationship that had previously been voiced only infrequently in the mainstream of the American political discourse.

Moreover, the changing composition of the American electorate will not eliminate the core of voters attached by emotive links to Israel, especially among evangelicals, but there will be larger numbers of voters with no religious or ethno-national roots in Israel's identity and history and among whom Israel's narrative is less resonant. To cite just one dramatic example of the change: 60 years ago, Hubert Humphrey, a vigorous supporter of Israel, was one of the senators from Minnesota; today, Ilhan Omar, perhaps the fiercest opponent of Israel in Congress, is a representative from the same state.

Furthermore, barring a change in the vector of Israeli society and politics, Israel may not even be able to count on the degree of support from the American Jewish community to which it has become accustomed. The majority of American Jews are committed liberals, and some exhibit growing signs of discomfort with the illiberalism of Israeli governments in recent years, not just with respect to "the peace process," but also with respect to domestic politics. For example, the majority of those affiliated with some stream of American Judaism (themselves only about two-thirds of American Jews) are members of Conservative or Reform congregations, precisely those streams subject to dismissive comments and discriminatory practices by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. Moreover, as the immediacy of the Holocaust fades with the passage of time, so, too, does emotional identification with Israel's raison d'être. Consequently, younger generations of Jews may well come

to feel less identified with, and committed to, Israel than were their parents or grandparents. Criticizing Israeli policy has long been commonplace. But in recent years, even more radical Jewish voices have been raised, identifying with extreme left-wing, anti-Semitic movements that question Israel's essential legitimacy. These voices are still truly marginal, amounting, by one estimate, to no more than about 3% of the Jewish community. Nevertheless, a recent poll shows that 51% of Israeli Jews already feel that US Jews are not supportive enough. Other things being equal, the alienation of American Jews from Israel may well intensify in the future.

Conclusions

In short, many of the traditional foundation stones of an intimate American-Israeli relationship may be subject to weakening or erosion. There is nothing in the foreseeable future to suggest a complete disconnect, much less the transmogrification of the United States into a hostile adversary. Israel and the United States will continue to share important interests that can underlie a strong transactional relationship, even more than during the Cold War, when the United States felt the need to compete with the Soviet Union for the alignment of Arab and Muslim states. After all, it is possible for two countries, even without any convergence of narratives, to retain strong bilateral ties based on transactional benefits. This is clear from the example of US-Turkish relations. Despite the absence of any congruence in either their personal or their national stories, President Barack Obama, a liberal democrat by almost any criterion, felt no compunction about claiming that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, an illiberal democrat by almost any reckoning, was one of the foreign leaders with whom he could share friendship and "bonds of trust."

Nor do the risks of a loosening of ties include the withdrawal of a guarantee of direct American intervention in Israel's defense in extremis; that has never been a formal part of the relationship, and it is something that Israel has never requested or needed — in part precisely because of the magnitude of American assistance, short of physical presence. Still, the erosion of the relationship, even if incremental, would have potentially serious consequences for the military, diplomatic, and economic security of the country, and that risk inheres in the degree to which Americans looking into the Israeli "mirror" come to see less and less of themselves.

Israeli leaders have always striven to avoid international isolation and invested a great deal in public diplomacy. They have also factored anticipated reactions of others, especially the United States, into discrete foreign and security policy decisions. However, although domestic politics have often influenced these calculations (as they do everywhere), the degree to which "purely" domestic political decisions affect the quality of foreign relations has not been sufficiently appreciated. In fact, since chains of causality run in both directions, the entire distinction between domestic and international politics and security may be an artificial construct.

That does not mean, of course, that any actor can easily shape any other society's political structure or political culture. In almost all instances, any influence that may inhere in a relationship is marginal and incremental rather than determinative — but not inconsequential for all that. Therefore, since the United States is such a central factor in Israel's wellbeing, the need to maintain some kind of narrative convergence ought to be a compelling reason for Israelis to pay more attention to the international ramifications of their "domestic" politics.

Mark A. Heller, PhD, is Principal Research Associate at the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University, and Visiting Fellow in the project "Israel in a Conflicting Regional and Global Environment: Internal Developments, Security Policy and External Relations." The project is part of the SWP Middle East and Africa Division and is funded by the Federal Foreign Office.

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3—4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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